

Being a Shelter from the Storm – Providing a home for more refugees

February 2022

“When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.”

Matthew 2:13-14

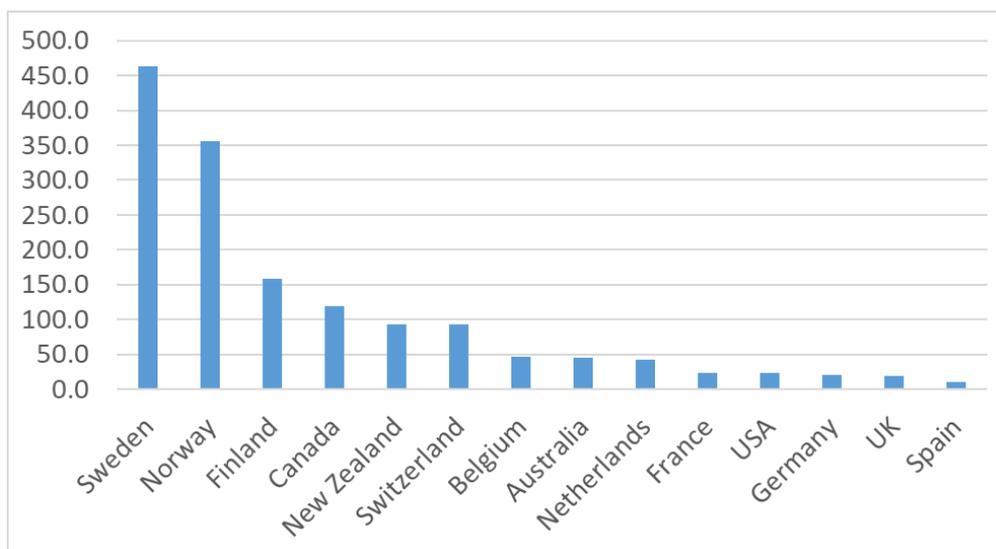
“As Christians called to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, challenge unjust systems and offer refuge and care to those who are marginalised and in exile, we have a particular responsibility in our society when it comes to responding to issues related to asylum seekers and refugees.”
 Shelter from the Storm - A Uniting Church in Australia Statement on Asylum Seeker & Refugee Policy, 2015

The willingness of the Australian Government to provide a safe home for people forced to flee persecution as refugees has been decreasing in recent years. From a low of giving protection to 13,735 people in the 2013-2014 financial year, it increased to 21,986 people in the 2016-2017 year. However, the number of granted protection places has decreased again. It will likely be less than 7,000 places in the 2020 – 2021 financial year. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated border closures contributed to the low number of refugees resettled to Australia.

The current Commonwealth Government cut the number of places for humanitarian protection from 18,750 to 13,750 in 2020.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees refers refugees for resettlement to appropriate countries. From 2020 to 2021, Australia’s intake rated towards the more generous end, but a long way behind countries like Sweden, Norway, Finland and Canada (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. UN High Commissioner for Refugees referred refugees for resettlement based on resettlement by country between 2020 and 2021, expressed as refugees resettled per million population.



There has been a decline in the number of refugees that the Australian Government has taken referred by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the 2012-2013 financial year, the Australian Government selected 80% of its humanitarian protection intake from UNHCR referrals. By the 2018-2019 financial year, only 23% of people granted humanitarian protection came through UNHCR referral processes. The Refugee Council of Australia has raised concerns that the Australian

Government is granting visas to people based on community links, outside of re-uniting families, in Australia and not on their need for resettlement.

A story of resettlement – Kyaw from Myanmar

Kyaw grew up in a small, rural village in the Karen State of Burma (Myanmar). He enjoyed a collective and straightforward way of life for much of his childhood. His people, the Karen, make up 7% of the Burmese population and have suffered oppression by successive regimes for decades.

Fleeing persecution from the Burmese junta, Kyaw ran away from his village when only a teenager and spent nine years languishing in a refugee camp in Thailand. Life in the refugee camp was challenging, and he was prohibited from leaving the camp. The refugees were under the constant watch of Thai soldiers. Daily food included beans and rice, and if you wanted meat, you had to sneak out of the camp and risk getting caught. During the daytime, Burmese refugees in the camp went to school and learnt English, history and other subjects. In the evening, they went to the soccer club and played soccer with friends.

Kyaw and his family arrived in Australia in September 2009. When they landed in Australia, Kyaw had a tremendous sense of relief that life would be better than before. In Burma, they had to flee from persecution by the Burmese junta. In Thailand, they were afraid of the local authorities. He felt that he had a new lease on life in Australia and did not have to worry about being mistreated or killed by police or soldiers. His family has received a lot of help from many kind people and organisations.

Kyaw and his family like to watch movies, study, or surf the net in their spare time. Kyaw also likes to spend time with friends from the Karen community, especially on Sunday when they go to church together.

Case documented by Researchers for Asylum Seekers at the University of Melbourne
<https://ras.unimelb.edu.au/refugee-stories/kyaw>

What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

The Hon Alex Hawke

Minister for Immigration, Citizenship,
Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs
PO Box 6022
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Senator, the Hon Kristina Keneally

Shadow Minister for Immigration and
Citizenship
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister

Salutation: Dear Senator

Points to make in your letters:

- As a wealthy country, Australia should be willing to play a leading role in providing protection to refugees who have been forced to flee their homes.
- Ask that they commit to supporting an increase in the number of humanitarian places Australia offers to 20,000 by the 2022-2023 financial year and 25,000 by the 2023-2024 financial year.
- Acknowledge it is important for families of refugees to be able to reunite and you support the ongoing access to such visas.
- At the same time, ask that outside of family reunion for refugees, greater prioritisation needs to be given giving resettlement places to the most vulnerable refugees identified by the UNHCR.

Acknowledgement: The JIM Cluster thanks the Refugee Council of Australia for much of the information used in this action.